Close Listening: Katarina Zdjelar's *My lifetime (Malaika)* (2012)

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The video work *My lifetime (Malaika)* (2012) by Katarina Zdjelar opens with a close-up of a musical instrument, a double bass whose surface is deeply scratched, etched by time and use. The camera scans the belly of the instrument, its loosely hanging bridge, its battered F-holes. It pans upwards along the neck of the bass, watching the strings vibrating, finally glimpsing the hand that plucks those strings. It is a black hand; that of an old man with knotted fingers. We watch these gestures in silence, quietly taking in the scene through a series of fragments.

The music starts. It is regal and upbeat. The camera moves on to the studied face of a young oboe player. It scans the whereabouts of the orchestra, who gather rather unceremoniously on grubby plastic chairs. A frowning cello player is concentrating just too much, as if she were missing her reading glasses. The double bass player's face comes into view, so sculpted by time, it might have been carved. The thickly revarnished surface of his instrument catches the light. We see a close-up of the wood, the man's aging hand. The palette of browns is punctuated by the gold and silver of tarnished instruments and the motley of 'traditional' African patterns adorning the shirts and dresses of a number of the players. This is Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra, practising in the National Theatre in Accra.

The music goes on, upright and perfect. But something is not quite right. The trombone player leans on his instrument for support, trying to get some sleep in before his slot comes up. His face is sliding down the side of his instrument, his eyes blinking open sporadically with the half-alertness of a sleeping guard dog. A large globule of saliva is accumulating in the uncovered spit valve of a tarnished trumpet, threatening to fall. Beads of sweat are gathering on the trumpet player's neck. It is hot, too hot to be practising. The discipline normally associated with an orchestra rehearsal is interrupted by the coming and going of musicians. One latecomer is applying resin to his cello bow while the music is already in full sway. Another is thumbing through sheet music to find the right page to join in. She wipes sweat from her brow and flicks it to the floor. We are conscious of the musicians as people, of the orchestra as a gathering of bodies – too conscious to give due attention to their music.

While watching, we come to realise that the quality of a European symphony orchestra is not only its skill – its technical mastery of instruments, but its ease; the naturalness with which the body achieves this perfection, the apparent lack of effort, the rising above physical constraints, "the most visible assertion of freedom from the constraints which dominate ordinary people".[1] We see the cultivated body in action, those delicate and refined fingers which have never known real labour. We can access the music directly, unimpeded by the (personal) conditions of its production.

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[1] "The distance from self that comes naturally to those who possess enough cultural and social capital to be self-assured of their position is in contrast with the self-consciousness and studious exertions of he/she who strives to enter the circles of elite culture without being born into such privilege. Moreover the interest in form that is the hallmark of the arts implies a break with the ordinary functional attitude towards the world, which is implicitly also a social break" (Bourdieu, 2006: 255–256).

Zdjelar's work is subtle. It appears to be a portrait of people, of an orchestra, but it is not. It is rather a portrait of a socio-political matrix embodied in a cultural product, in the material conditions and physical gestures of an orchestra. What we see here is close to what Pierre Bourdieu referred to as "hexis" – the repeated and affirmed performance of particular cognitive, affective and bodily repertoires that form the unconscious dispositions of a culture.[2] The body acts as a mnemonic device upon which the underpinnings of postcolonial Ghanese culture are imprinted and enacted.

The musicians in *My lifetime* might be said to embody the "almost, but not quite" Homi Bhabha associates with colonial mimicry – an inculcation of colonial culture that extends into postcolonial time, into the present. This mimicry reveals the trick that colonial discourse plays: the promise that the colonised can be like the coloniser, while always assuming that they cannot, the colonised remaining caught in this gap between seeming and being. Bhabha highlights that colonial mimesis had to be flawed, in order for the colonised other to never quite ascend to the status of the superior coloniser.[3]

If Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra is flawed in the present, it is not for the lack of musical competence or even due to the unnatural grafting of European culture onto a different cultural context. We can sense, watching the rehearsal, that this music has been part of life here for many generations. This rubs against a postcolonial racism that must always be surprised by the success of the colonial cultural transfer. However, the flaw lies elsewhere – in the lack of capital necessary to sustain the competences that have been developed. While promising that the production of the highest level of cultural product is based on innate talents, *My lifetime* shows up the still exclusive means of appropriating the material and symbolic goods necessary to create a cultural product of the highest level, a means rarely available in a postcolonial economy. Cultural products

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[2] Zdjelar shows how deep-rooted these bodily repertoires are in works such as *The Perfect Sound* (2009), in which we witness a speech therapist in the U.K. doing exercises to remove the accent of an immigrant client. It becomes evident that language is embodied in subtle movements of the mouth as we watch the immigrant repeatedly imitating the primal sounds made by the therapist. Zdjelar shows us the near impossibility of transposing full bodily gestures from one culture and language to another in a further work, *Too old, too tired and too fucking blind* (2012), in which an actor struggles to enact Al Pacino's courtroom monologue from *Scent of a Woman* (1992) in the Dutch language, which is not his native tongue. In this gesture of double appropriation we see the actor incorporating the stance, posture and facial expressions of Al Pacino and attempting to reproduce the linguistic and affective qualities of his speech-act in the Dutch language, with which it has no natural affinity.

[3] In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (2004: 126). Bhabha notes that the effect of the double articulation inherent in colonial mimicry is both profound and disturbing for the authority of colonial discourse. His Freudian reading of the encounter between the European and the colonial mimic alerts us to the possibility that the European viewer's reception of the postcolonial Ghanaian orchestra may operate at different levels, with superficial bemusement at the grafting of a European musical tradition onto an African context likely to be accompanied by unease at other, less rational, levels. The acquisition of European culture through colonial mimicry has its parallels in the contemporary experience of "cultural assimilation", in which immigrants are invited to become "almost, but not quite" European through the compulsory acquisition of European languages and socio-cultural practices. Hence we can draw a parallel between *My lifetime (Malaika)* and works in which Zdjelar shows the immigrant's laboured and painstaking attempts at linguistic acquisition. Works such as *Would it be alright with you if I brought my cat along* (2006), *Untitled as Mrs. Laker* (2006) and *The Perfect Sound* (2009) show the unnaturalness and implicit symbolic violence of everyday processes of cultural integration.

like orchestral music function as cultural capital precisely because of the rarity of the means required to appropriate them.[4]

The formation of Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra in the 1950s showed the desire of a newly independent nation to both assert its nationhood and act as a role model for the new citizen of the new nation state, who should appreciate modern international culture and its associated political and economic values. This marked an official shift away from traditional Ghanese cultural values, in which a participatory and not spectator-oriented mode of engaging with culture was the norm. In the present the orchestra inhabits an ambiguous position. Being part of the political and cultural legacy of its founder, the national orchestra cannot be abolished without provoking political turmoil. Yet shifts of power have deemed it too insignificant in contemporary Ghanaian society to be supported financially. The rusting music stands and forlorn instruments used by Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra make us conscious of the unbroken line of wealth inherent in the European classical music world. The late arrivals and early departures of the musicians, their tiredness and divided concentrations are not due to a lack of dedication or professionalism. Quite the opposite, they are the by-products of a double existence as musicians who must work hard to buy time.[5] "Malaika" is an old Swahili tune about a lover who cannot make the woman he loves his bride because he lacks the means. There is a poignant relationship between the fate of the lover and that of the orchestra.

The contextual specificity of *My lifetime (Malaika)* stems from the work's origins in Zdjelar's month-long residence in Ghana as part of a collaboration between the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam and the Nubuke Foundation in Accra.[6] The work is inspired and nourished by her experience of this cultural dialogue; the unpredictable grittiness of cultural exchange in lived time. It also resounds with her long-term artistic commitment to making explicit what cannot be put into words, "the hidden persuasion of

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[4] As Pierre Bourdieu observes in *Distinction* (2006), the gratuitous expense of time or money that is presupposed by material or symbolic appropriation of the arts is a supreme example of this exclusivity. The ability to "buy time" to acquire the skills necessary to participate in a symphony orchestra typically bear witness to the presence of wealth in previous generations, classical music typically being introduced in the home through the live playing of a classical music instrument during available leisure time. In *Shoum* (2009) Zdjelar implies the exclusivity of acquisition of even those cultural products we do not usually associate with high cultural capital – in this case pop music. The video portrays two Serbian men transcribing Tears for Fears' outdated chart hit *Shout* acoustically, producing a kind of meta-language that is both a mark of their ignorance of the English language, a global *lingua franca* of the educated, and a sign of their agency as they deterritorialise a major language from their marginalised position and appropriate it for their own use.

[5] This double existence is experienced by musicians at early stages of their career the world over, but it is important to distinguish between "the self-imposed constraints and restrictions which make up the 'asceticism of the privileged'" and the constraints of the wider economic and political context which inform its citizens' lifelong preoccupation with basic material necessity (Bourdieu, 2006: 256).

[6] *My lifetime (Malaika)* was first exhibited as part of *Time, Trade and Travel*, an exhibition of work by Ghanaian and Netherlands-based artists on show at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA) from 25 August 2012 until 21 October 2012 and at the Nubuke Foundation in November 2012. The exhibition was conceived as a collective venture exploring the histories shared by Ghana and the Netherlands over various centuries and by extension, the diverse economic systems and geopolitical divisions in the contemporary world. More specifically, it addressed aspects of globalisation and transnationalism reflected in the field of contemporary art.

an implicit pedagogy […] an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy", often embodied in something as small and apparently insignificant as a pronunciation or a body posture (Bourdieu, 2002: 94). While Zdjelar's works always acknowledge the economy of cultural production in a global context, *My lifetime (Malaika)* is perhaps the first to address an overtly postcolonial cultural interrelationship. In this subtle work, she manages to do justice to the internal hierarchies of the postcolonial cultural field in an utterly non-didactic way. Neither a lament nor a critique, *My lifetime (Malaika)* is an observation of how things are; of the symbolic battlefield that continues out of sight of the consecrated centres of cultural production.

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